

Submission  
No 90

## INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Inner Sydney Voice

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**INNER SYDNEY VOICE**  
regional social development council

## **SUBMISSION**

**NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry**

**Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW**

**November 2024**

# Acknowledgment

ISV office is located on the land of the traditional owners of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the traditional owners of the lands across the areas we service, including the Bidjigal, Birrabirragal, Gadigal, Gweagal and Wangal people.

We acknowledge that sovereignty over these lands has never been ceded. ISV covers the local government areas of City of Sydney, Bayside, Randwick, Waverley, Woollahra, and the Inner West.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

## Introducing Inner Sydney Voice

Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development (known as Inner Sydney Voice - ISV) was established in 1974. We are a registered charity and a not-for-profit organisation that empowers people to have an equal say in the big-picture decisions that affect their lives and communities.

We do this by:

- Mobilizing and resourcing local community members to address the issues that matter most
- Urging decision-makers to listen to *all* voices, not only the most dominant ones
- Working with local communities to create genuine opportunities for people to have input, especially people who are disempowered
- Enabling people to engage effectively in consultation, planning and decision-making
- Strengthening the capacity of organisations that pursue related goals

One of our key activities is publishing the iconic Inner Sydney Voice Magazine. Since 1978, the magazine has been unique among community publications in many topics it covers, such as employment, the environment, transport, welfare, social issues such as loneliness, housing, politics and the community sector. Contributions are drawn from staff, local residents, community organisations, academics and groups.

Inner Sydney Voice has a strong legacy and deep connection with our region, the diverse communities which we seek to resource and represent and the local service systems.

Since 2022 ISV has worked with others to collect stories about the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness across our region. This social pandemic requires local solutions. This submission is based on the narratives of locals, their own lived experience and the evidence from the local service system.

# Prevalence

*“... I find it hard to believe that a City like this (Sydney), with so many people and things to do could have so many lonely people....surely these people have other health issues. It’s not that they are just feeling a little lonely.... “*

*Glebe Resident at Inner Sydney Voice – On for Young and Old -Community Conversation*

There is an overwhelming lack of knowledge or understanding of what loneliness looks like, feels like and what it means for people. It is far easier to label people as “loners”, “mentally unwell”, “immersed in their phone” or “anti-social” than to understand the reasons behind the behaviours they are seeing.

People told us that admitting to feeling lonely doesn’t feel like a culturally safe thing to do. The judgement and blame is almost always attributed to a deficit in a person’s character or emotional state. It makes it difficult for people to accept or admit that loneliness could be the reason for their poor health and wellbeing.

*“...I was embarrassed that I felt lonely. I just blamed myself. I kept thinking “...What is wrong with me...Everyone online looked like they were having a ball with friends.... How could I admit to being such a loser...”*

*Participant, Inner Sydney Youth Voice Group*

The Inquiry will be directed to evidence that helps describe the prevalence of loneliness. The State of Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023 curates the evidence and demonstrates that **1 in 3 Australian** adults are lonely.

Determining the prevalence of loneliness is difficult as it relies on people understanding what they are feeling is lonely and then disclosing their feelings in a context that sees loneliness as “taboo” or a “personal deficit”.

In June 2023, the then Deputy Mayor of City of Sydney,(Councillor Sylvie Ellsmore) convened a Town Hall meeting in conjunction with Inner Sydney Voice. The packed meeting heard from community members and service leaders that social isolation and loneliness does not discriminate. People shared their stories of older people, younger people, people living with chronic health conditions, new parents and recent arrivals are most at risk.

***“..It disturbs me to think that when I visited her, I was the only person she has spoken to a week. Caring for a new baby is hard enough when there is a full circle of support, but not having anyone to call on to just give you time to get out of your PJ’s is a huge risk for both mum and bub....”***

***Volunteer Home Visiting Service for New Parents- Botany***

Most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives (Relationships Australia 2018). An estimated 1 in 3 (33%) Australians reported an episode of loneliness between 2001 and 2009, with 40% of these people experiencing more than 1 episode, according to a study of loneliness using data from the longitudinal Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Baker 2012).

In surveys undertaken since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, just over half (54%) of respondents reported that they felt more lonely since the start of the pandemic (Lim et al. 2020).

As we have begun to name it and talk about it, we continue to grow our collective understanding that the growing prevalence of loneliness is possibly the leading health economic and social issue of our time.

## Causes

***“..... I got sick. Real sick and spent more time at home alone. I lost contact with friends and rarely saw or spoke to anyone. This of course made me sicker....”***

***Participant, Inner Sydney Voice – On for Young and Old -Community Conversation***

The research confirms a range of causes of loneliness. The lived experience stories support that although loneliness is different to social isolation, the two factors may co-exist and can have similar impacts. People told us that although they live in a busy City with large numbers of people, they may have infrequent social contacts.

Others said that despite having contact with people they had experienced the feelings of loneliness and yearned for deeper and more satisfying social relationships.

The root causes of loneliness are many and varied. It is difficult to determine why someone ends up feeling or experiencing loneliness but there is a growing realization that over time, some of our “institutions” that protected us against loneliness have changed or disappeared. Families and community structured have changed and this may have led us to creating opportunities for loneliness to “thrive”.

***“... After a year of living here I realised that I did not know any of my neighbours by name. I went to work, returned, hopped in the lift and went up to my apartment...I was living with hundreds of people and had never felt lonelier in my life....”***

***Green Square Resident – Inner Sydney Voice Civic Participation Program***

The number of lone households across our region suggest that our community members are more at risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness. The way we are building new communities, high rise living, no front doors, limited open spaces, no or limited community centres all play a role in causing loneliness.

In addition, we know from research and the individual stories of people across our region that poverty and the rising cost of living play a significant role in how people are able to connect and where.

At a recent Civic Participation Program participants shared stories of how their lives changed and how that created a deep sense of loneliness for them. Several people spoke about their separation or divorce. New parents said that they never expected to feel so alone with their new baby.

Perhaps the most repeated story we have heard and collected is the relationship between grief and loss and loneliness. And the genuine unpreparedness of people to cope with such loss and mitigate the risk of loneliness.

***“... A year ago my wife died and I just didn’t understand what was happening. The grief was one thing but the feeling of being alone scared me. Nighttime was the worst. I felt so bloody lonely....”***

***Participant, Inner Sydney Voice – On for Young and Old -Community Conversation***

Finally, and importantly the Inquiry needs to hear and accept that despite good intentions of government policies of the time, the erosion of sustainable community infrastructure and a lack of investment over the past few decades in local community strengthening is a fundamental cause of loneliness.

Place based community centers where people feel welcomed and safe have shifted over time to survive. Some have closed and many moved into direct service provision that requires a high level of compliance and diverts these place based community centres from their core purpose. To enable their community members to connect and mitigate risks of loneliness and other disasters.

Communities that offer opportunities for social connection and resources people at different stages of their lives play a critical role in creating well and harmonious citizens and communities.

Several decades ago, we saw community centres playing a vital role in providing activities for people of all ages to improve mental and physical health, strengthen connections, create support networks, provide access to information and guidance and build resilience and social cohesion. Over the past decade we have seen a decline in public funding for this critical social infrastructure. We know that in neighborhoods where there is a community center (e.g., Surry Hills, Junction Neighbourhood Centre) we see increased participation and inclusion of people, the establishment of more informal networks of support and more preventative help seeking behaviors.

In many ways, community centres are the vaccinations needed to protect people against loneliness.

***“... I come up here often. It is where I meet others. Where I volunteer to give something back and where I turn to when I need help...I don't know what I would do if this centre wasn't here.”***

***Participant, Inner Sydney Voice – On for Young and Old -Community Conversation***

## Impact

When we compare the lived experience stories, experiences of service providers with the data presented from our primary health network (Central East Primary Health Network) we begin to gain a better understanding of the impacts of loneliness.

Our region is characterized by high levels of reported experience of psychological distress, higher liver cancer incidence rate compared to the NSW, high rates of diabetes and heart disease linked to high rates of obesity. We also note that our region has the highest percentage of lone households in the nation as well as a highly transient population (e.g. University students from overseas and domestically).

The research confirms that the impact of loneliness on an individual's health and wellbeing is significant. There is strong evidence to support this, and ISV is confident the Inquiry will be directed to such evidence. However, loneliness does not only impact the individual. Loneliness is not only an individual health problem. There are significant socio-economic impacts of long term, entrenched loneliness.

The impact of having high numbers of people who are experiencing loneliness in one place is also significant. Whilst the research is premature, the evidence is emerging. The impact on financial security, a sense of safety and civic participation is worrying. These factors play a role in shaping strong, resilient, prosperous and safe communities.

We hear from many people that their own sense of safety particularly in some of our inner Sydney housing estate areas contributes to their participation and engagement and subsequently loneliness. It is almost like a vicious cycle of loneliness.

***“..I don’t go out anymore as I feel unsafe walking around. I’ve been verbally abused and chased. And I certainly don’t leave the flat after night fall. It makes a long and lonely existence... “***

***Resident, Waterloo Social Housing***

Inner Sydney Voice is also involved in building community preparedness plans to deal with hazards and disasters. Using our community development expertise we have been able to identify that where there are high numbers of people experiencing loneliness, and social disadvantage there is less likely to be inclusive community preparedness planning to mitigate the risks of disaster. There is a heavy reliance on formal services to do what neighbours and informal support networks do to prepare and care for people.

Lonely communities enable loneliness to thrive. Loneliness impacts individual and community wellbeing. Invest in public spaces, amenities, connections, activities and mitigate the risks of loneliness. That is what we are all working towards.